

SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

# What if Ken Starr Was Right?

Ross Douthat NOV. 18, 2017

In the longstanding liberal narrative about Bill Clinton and his scandals, the one pushed by Clinton courtiers and ratified in media coverage of his post-presidency, our 42nd president was only guilty of being a horndog, his affairs were nobody's business but his family's, and oral sex with Monica Lewinsky was a small thing that should never have put his presidency in peril.

That narrative could not survive the current wave of outrage over male sexual misconduct.

So now a new one may be forming for the age of Harvey Weinstein and Donald Trump. In this story, Kenneth Starr and the Republicans are still dismissed as partisan witch hunters. But liberals might be willing to concede that the Lewinsky affair was a pretty big deal morally, a clear abuse of sexual power, for which Clinton probably should have been pressured to resign.

This new narrative lines up with what's often been my own assessment of the Clinton scandals. I have never been a Clinton hater; indeed, I've always been a little mystified by the scale of Republican dislike for the most centrist of recent Democratic leaders. So I've generally held what I've considered a sensible middle-ground position on his sins — that he should have stepped down when the Lewinsky affair came to light, but that the Republican effort to impeach him was a hopeless attempt to legislate against dishonor.

But a moment of reassessment is a good time to reassess things for yourself, so I spent this week reading about the lost world of the 1990s. I skimmed the Starr Report. I leafed through books by George Stephanopoulos and Joe Klein and Michael Isikoff. I dug into Troopergate and Whitewater and other first-term scandals. I reacquainted myself with Gennifer Flowers and Webb Hubbell, James Riady and Marc Rich.

After doing all this reading, I'm not sure my reasonable middle ground is actually reasonable. It may be that the conservatives of the 1990s were simply *right* about Clinton, that once he failed to resign he really deserved to be impeached.

Yes, the Republicans were too partisan, the Starr Report was too prurient and Clinton's haters generated various absurd conspiracy theories.

But the Clinton operation was also extraordinarily sordid, in ways that should be thrown into particular relief by the absence of similar scandals in the Obama administration, which had perfervid enemies and circling investigators as well.

The sexual misconduct was the heart of things, but everything connected to Clinton's priapism was bad: the use of the perks of office to procure women, willing and unwilling; the frequent use of that same power to buy silence and bully victims; and yes, the brazen public lies and perjury.

Something like Troopergate, for instance, in which Arkansas state troopers claimed to have served as Clinton's panderers and been offered jobs to buy their silence, is often recalled as just a right-wing hit job. But if you read The Los Angeles Times's reporting on the allegations (which included phone records confirming the troopers' account of a mistress Clinton was seeing during his presidential transition) and Stephanopoulos's portrayal of Clinton's behavior in the White House when the story broke, the story seems like it was probably mostly true.

I have less confidence about what was real in the miasma of Whitewater. But with Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky, we know what happened: A president being sued for sexual harassment tried to buy off a mistress-turned-potential-witness with White House favors, and then committed perjury serious enough to merit

disbarment. Which also brought forward a compelling allegation from Juanita Broaddrick that the president had raped her.

The longer I spent with these old stories, the more I came back to a question: If exploiting a willing intern is a serious enough abuse of power to warrant resignation, why is obstructing justice in a sexual harassment case not serious enough to warrant impeachment? Especially when the behavior is part of a longstanding pattern that also may extend to rape? Would any feminist today hesitate to take a similar opportunity to remove a predatory studio head or C.E.O.?

There is a common liberal argument that our present polarization is the result of constant partisan escalations on the right — the rise of Newt Gingrich, the steady Hannitization of right-wing media.

Some of this is true. But returning to the impeachment imbroglio made me think that in that case the most important escalators were the Democrats. They had an opportunity, with Al Gore waiting in the wings, to show a predator the door and establish some moral common ground for a polarizing country.

And what they did instead — turning their party into an accessory to Clinton's appetites, shamelessly abandoning feminist principle, smearing victims and blithely ignoring his most credible accuser, all *because Republicans funded the investigations and they're prudes and it's all just Sexual McCarthyism* — feels in the cold clarity of hindsight like a great act of partisan deformation.

For which, it's safe to say, we have all been amply punished since.

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